

What is tetanus?

Tetanus, commonly called lockjaw, is a bacterial disease that affects the nervous system. Due to widespread immunization, tetanus is now a rare disease.

Who gets tetanus?

Persons who have not been vaccinated adequately against tetanus are the most likely to get the disease. Tetanus occurs more often in older people who have not received adequate booster doses of vaccine and in agricultural workers where contact with animal manure is more likely.

How is tetanus spread?

The tetanus bacteria enter the body through a wound that is contaminated with the bacteria. It is not spread from person to person.

Where are the tetanus bacteria found?

The tetanus bacteria live throughout the environment and are commonly found in soil contaminated with manure.

What are the symptoms of tetanus?

A common first sign of tetanus is muscular stiffness in the jaw (lockjaw), followed by stiffness of the neck, difficulty in swallowing, rigidity of abdominal muscles, and spasms.

How soon after infection do symptoms occur?

The incubation period is usually ten days but may range from three days to three weeks. Shorter incubation periods are associated with more heavily contaminated wounds.

Does past infection with tetanus make a person immune?

Recovery from tetanus may not result in immunity. A person who has had tetanus can get it again. A person should be immunized after recovering from tetanus.

What is the treatment for tetanus?

Wounds should be thoroughly cleaned, and dead or devitalized tissue removed. If the patient has not had a tetanus toxoid booster in the previous 10 years, a single booster injection should be administered on the day of injury. For severe wounds, a booster may be given if the patient has not been previously immunized with a series of at least three doses of toxoid.

Is there a vaccine for tetanus?

An effective vaccine called tetanus toxoid has been available for many years. Tetanus toxoid in combination with diphtheria toxoid and pertussis vaccine (DTP) is given at two, four, six and 15 months of age and between four and six years of age. Children who are seven years of age or older should receive (tetanus and diphtheria) toxoid. A tetanus booster shot is recommended every 10 years throughout life.

What can be done to prevent the spread of tetanus?

The single most important preventive measure is to maintain a high level of immunization in the community. Another way to prevent tetanus is to thoroughly clean wounds.

